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ABSTRACT

It is questioned whether high school students need to be taught the reading skills that have been identified to be taught in high school. Students who have acquired the basic skills forge ahead on their own. If they don't know the basic skills, there's no guarantee that they'll be learned if taught. One study shows college students to be antagonistic toward the work they were doing, and this resulted in little or no skill acquirement. Yet, evidence shows that all high school students don't read with proficiency. Students should acquire reading skills through self-paced instruction, working only with those skills lacking. Packaged learning materials are useful for this purpose. A student is pretested until skills needed are identified. He then selects from suggested materials and activities in a learning package those which fit his unique style of learning. Behavioral objectives guide him as he learns. When he has achieved all the objectives in the package, he may proceed to the next skill. Reading skills necessary for high school students include: decoding, interpreting, and applying. For best possible results, teachers should teach indirectly. Students report liking school better when the teacher accepts student responses, asks questions, and is encouraging. In short, a curriculum change is needed in high school reading programs. (CK)

READING SKILLS AND THE HIGH SCHOOL ENGLISH PROGRAM

RAMON ROYAL ROSS

Several nights ago I asked my high school freshman daughter about the reading instruction she receives in her English class. I was rewarded with an incredulous look -- I'm often rewarded by her with those looks -- "Reading? We learned all that in the first grade!"

"But," I persisted, "what about the special skills required in high school? Using reference materials, and outlining, identifying themes in writing, and the like?"

"We don't do any of that," she said, "we already know how to do all those things."

It may be she's right. She's a bright girl, and all the students in her class are pretty bright as well. Do they need to be taught the reading skills we've identified to teach in high school? Or have they learned most of them on their own, without much help from us? J. B. Stroud, in that classic text of his, Psychology of Education, points out that, whereas even good students don't advance much on their own in a skill like mathematics, working always within the realm of what they have been taught, readers forge ahead, without help, once the basics have been established. For some students, then, high school reading instruction is a waste of time and a bore for them and their teacher. They already know those skills.

Even if they don't know them, there's no guarantee that they'll be learned if taught. Feinberg, Long, and Rosenheck described a study in which specific reading skills were taught to college freshmen. Post tests showed no gains. The researchers hunched that the students in the study felt antagonistic toward the work they were doing and this resulted in little or no skill acquirement.

On the other hand, there is plenty of evidence that all high school students don't read with ease and proficiency. Robert Karlin, citing studies of reading skills among New York City students, arrived at the sobering conclusion that 23% of the freshman and sophomore students would not be able to read high school texts. Nearly one quarter of the school population! When expressed in terms of ability, the results are even more depressing; nearly 43% were reading below their potential ability.

Here, then, lies the dilemma. We have good evidence that there are many high school students who can't read well enough to do the work the school expects of them. We also find that the reaction to classroom teaching of reading skills is received by many students with less than enthusiastic reception. And, we know that there are many English teachers for whom the teaching of reading is anathema -- it's like asking Van Cliburn to repair pianos.

I myself must admit to a certain schizophrenia when it comes to teaching reading. I know there are certain specifics which students ought to learn -- or at least we think they ought to -- but at the same time I am becoming increasingly less certain of the certainties. The thought of dragging students through hours of tedium because it will be "good for them" or because the curriculum specified it tears at my insides.

It is one side of the schizophrenia in me that is attracted to the concept of self-instruction as a way to teach reading skills. If students must learn reading skills -- and I believe they must -- then I would prefer that these skills be acquired through self-paced instruction, working only with those skills the student doesn't already have. The student, using packaged learning materials, sets his own pace and achieves measurable performances under given conditions at or above specified minimum levels. He knows where he is while he's working, and he knows when he is finished that he has met the criterion required of him.

When learning within this frame-work the student, with the help of his teacher, finds the particular skills needed in his sequential learning program -- say it is the identification of theme in a short story -- and takes a pre-test based on the behavioral objectives related to that skill. If the pre-test shows he can meet these objectives already, he is directed to another skill. If, however, the pre-test results indicate that he is

ready to learn about "theme of a short story," then he selects from suggested materials and activities in a learning package those which fit his unique style of learning. Behavioral objectives, stated for him in the package, guide him as he learns. In "theme," for example, the first behavioral objective might be something like this:

> "Given a list of ten paired character traits, the student will select the two pairs which identify the changes in the protagonist of a given short story."

To meet that objective, the student is given a story to read, after which he selects from a group of ten pairs those which he sees as most accurately describing the changes in the protagonist. Following that, he checks his answer. If correct he moves on to a self-evaluation, which gives him additional opportunity to check his skill. When the student feels that he has accomplished one behavioral objective, he moves on to the next one, and again selects from suggested learning materials and activities.

When the student has achieved all the behavioral objectives in the learning package "Theme" he takes a self-test. If the self-test indicates that he is ready for teacher evaluation, the student can request the post-test for the skill. Upon successful completion of the post-test, the student may proceed to the next skill or he may participate in quest activities. In these quests, the student defines a problem for in-depth or in-breadth study, and conducts his research in order to achieve some level

of resolution of his problem. Using "theme in the short story" again, he might compare several stories and note those in which there are similarities of theme.

During all of this, the teacher is working to provide as many opportunities as possible for student-teacher and student-student interaction. A small learning team, made up of six to eight students, might be studying "theme" at the same time. The teacher monitors each student's progress, diagnoses learning problems, prescribes possible alternative learning materials and activities, and evaluates each student's progress in achieving stated behavioral objectives.

Several questions must be occurring to you by now: 1) What are the reading skills necessary for a high school student to possess? 2) What's the advantage of self-instruction in reading skills? and 3) Where would one ever get enough learning packages to teach those skills?

First, the reading skills themselves. Essentially, these may be divided into three major categories: decoding, interpreting, and applying. That is, a student must know the words he reads, he must bring some kind of meaning to those words, and he must try out those words to see if they apply in his life. The first of these skills; decoding, is generally within the power of most high school students. That is, they can recognize the words they see, using context clues, phonics, word structure, the dictionary, or their own backlog of known words. If a student

has a problem in decoding, it is essential that help be given him in this area. However, such help will probably require specialized tutoring and remediation. A student who, for 9 years or more, has made so few gains in reading is almost certain to have awesome feelings of inadequacy. To hope to give him word recognition skills in an English class is totally unrealistic, and will only lead to anxiety and guilt for the teacher, and frustration and failure for the student. It is possible, however, that there are certain word recognition skills which can be packaged and taught in the high school English Program. Take the use of the dictionary. Identifying root words from alternate forms of the word, using the pronounciation guide to decode unknown words, using guide words -- these are skills which students could test themselves on, and, if that test reveals a lack of competency, could lead to self-instruction.

The second cluster of reading skills, those involving comprehension and interpretation, are what many of us feel most comfortable teaching. Helping students to make use of context, teaching them common roots, prefixes and suffixes, working with what Robert Karlin refers to as "multinyms" -- words like run, and open, and play, which change meanings as the context varies -- these are among our first concerns when teaching comprehension. Beyond that, however, it is expected that the student will be able to interpret what he comprehends -- inferring relationships and drawing conclusions, probing for meanings, and recognizing

fact and opinion when they are mingled in writing.

And third, we come to the region of application. This is a broad category, ranging from study skills such as following directions, locating information, and summarizing through to the appreciation of literature; encompassing as it does comparison and constant questioning.

Sketchy as this list of skills is, perhaps it serves as a partial answer to the second question: What is the advantage of self-instruction in reading skills? The diversity of reading abilities in a high school English class is so great as to defy conventional teaching strategies. To set out in an English class to teach, say, identification of theme makes the assumption that the students in that class can all read with meaning the material assigned. This is, with the possible exception of honors classes or classes for college bound, not necessarily true. If you doubt this, administer a simple word reading test to your students, such as the Wide Range Achievement Test, or the San Diego Quick Assessment. Note the range of scores. In most classes we may predict that the spread of abilities will go from 3rd or 4th grade through college. Some of these students need help in such basic reading skills as syllabication, blending, and topic sentence recognition; while others are ready to explore study skills needed to read math, or science, or social studies, and still others are at the point where they can deal with irony, connotation and denotation, and style. Clearly, self-instruction cannot solve all the problems

such diversity of skill brings with it, but it is one immediately practical way of giving each of these students help with those skills he needs.

A second reason for my urging the use of self-instruction for the learning of reading skills is my belief that the classroom hour is better spent in small group instruction and teacher-student exchange of the ideas and feelings elicited by books and plays and television than in specific work with reading skills. Many of you are familiar with the work of Ned Flanders in Interaction Analysis. As you may recall, he has found that students learn best when teachers are more indirect than direct, and when students have an opportunity to initiate discussion as well as simply respond to teacher questioning. Not only are the academic gains higher, but students report liking school better when the learning situation is indirect. What is meant by indirect? That the teacher accepts student responses, both cognitive and affective; that the teacher asks questions rather than simply tell and lecture: that the teacher praise and encourage rather than criticize and reject.

Now, all of this sounds entirely reasonable to most of us, but the unusual aspect of Flander's work is that, through analysis, a teacher may look at samples of his teaching and change his behavior if it needs modifying. A teacher may learn, for example, that he talks 75% of the time -- a figure, incidentally, that keeps re-appearing in samples. That is a lot

of teacher talk, particularly when we consider that the person who seems to learn the most from talk is the person talking. But, if a teacher knows he's talking that much, he can re-shape his style to ask more and different kinds of questions, to allow more student participation, to encourage students to use class time to get to know themselves, and others -- to begin to feel, and touch, and smell their environment without fear of rejection or criticism. This, it seems to me, lies at the heart of a good learning environment. The stimulation a student receives in such a milieu will carry over to his personal study of the skills he himself feels the need to acquire.

And, finally, where would one ever get enough learning packages to teach all of these skills? The list might not be as lengthy as one would initially think. We have been, at my college, trying to establish behavioral objectives for the classes we teach. When we ask ourselves, "What do we expect students to be able to do as a result of taking this class?" the list starts growing shorter and shorter.

And there are many learning packages already in existence. Teachers have written these, tried them out, and then banked them.[1]

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[1]One such bank is located at the Materials Dissemination Center, 27965 Cabot Road, South Laguna, CA 92677. Ask them to send you information on how to prepare UNIPACS, together with a list of those UNIPACS already in existence.

You can write them yourself, using a standard format that includes these ingredients:

1. The concept to be taught
2. Instructional objectives
3. Diversified content to implement learning
4. Diversified strategies for the student to employ in learning
5. Independent study
6. A pre- and post-test

I said that you could write these yourself. But teaching is a lonely game -- sometimes I think it is one of the loneliest -- and teachers can band together to make the work go faster. If an entire English Department decided to package its skill curriculum, then that resource would be available for anyone who chose to use it.

Nor should one hesitate to draw on the students who are working with the packets. Seek their help. Ask for the changes they would like to see incorporated in the packages.

Our old ways must change. The formality of group instruction simply isn't defensible in terms of economy of time or human needs. In the Rubaiyat, Omar Khayyan wrote:

> My self when young did eagerly frequent
> Doctor and saint, and heard great argument
> And evermore,
> Went out by that same door
> Wherein I went.

It's time for us to begin looking for different doors.

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